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‘Just Plain Danilo Petrovich’: John Gilbert’s Performance as Negotiation in *The Merry Widow* (1925).

The final scene of *The Merry Widow* (Erich von Stroheim, 1925) sees a coronation take place in the grandiose cathedral of Montebianco, the Ruritania kingdom where the film is set. The new monarch is the former Prince Danilo Petrovich (John Gilbert), splendidly robed and wearing an enormous crown; amid the opulence of the holy place, which is lavishly adorned and lit by tall candles, he is shown placing a smaller crown on the head of the new Queen, his bride the Baroness Sadoja, born Sally O’Hara (Mae Murray). In the presence of a reverential crowd, and flanked by two files of Royal Guards, the King next walks down the aisle with his Queen; he holds a sceptre and an orb in his hands, and moves slowly under the weight of his massive, dome-like crown. Carefully turning towards the Queen, with a hint of mischief in his eyes, he speaks to her and his words come up on screen: ‘Well - Sally O’Hara’. She playfully bows her head and replies ‘Yes – Your Majesty’. The King looks around him for a second, as to make sure he is not overheard, then shakes his head repeatedly at the Queen, to indicate that ‘Your Majesty’ is not right. Smiling, he corrects her: ‘Just plain Danilo Petrovich’.

The King’s claim to ‘plainness’ seems wholly incongruous with the magnificence of the scene, and especially with his own majestic appearance in it; yet this paradox defines John Gilbert in *The Merry Widow*, the film which turned him into a huge star. Placed in the strictly-regulated world of Stroheim’s vision, he is partly a cog in a machine, just one element of the stylistic and rhythmic system that is *The Merry*

Widow; to his conformity to a greater scheme, however, Gilbert adds the mark of stardom, which is exceptionality.

Film stars have indeed been described as complex, unstable combinations of the ordinary and the extraordinary; when this apparent contradiction is invoked, however, it is usually only applied to conflicting facets of a star's image. Yet in relation to Gilbert in *The Merry Widow*, 'ordinariness' is not just an aspect of his star persona or his role as Danilo: it is also a levelling function of his seamless insertion in the film's ensemble structure. Striving to present a whole world in all its complexity, *The Merry Widow* offers a crowded narrative, an extremely intricate visual style, and a frame dense with characters and motifs, all channelled together at one sweeping pace. At the same time, the film charts John Gilbert's inexorable rise to stardom: it is a rise embedded in the balance of stylistic elements, which Gilbert complies and adapts to, while also exploiting it for his own self-display. His star-making performance is not achieved by taking over or subverting the film's style; on the contrary, it is a masterpiece of harmonious negotiation, by which he focuses on himself the seductive elements of the film, without disrupting its flow. In doing this, Gilbert emerges as the central presence in *The Merry Widow*, even eclipsing its leading lady and established star Mae Murray.

As Andrew Klevan has written, the analysis of actors' performance can reveal 'the complexity of a performer's internal relationship within a film'.¹ In Gilbert's case, his complex dynamics within *The Merry Widow* hinge on a constant mediation between conformity to, and dominance of, the film text. This paper focuses on Gilbert's performance in the context of the film's style; in the light of specific concerns about silent film acting, such as gestural language and the notion of divaesque, it argues that negotiation is key in creating John Gilbert's dominant meaning on screen.

Based on Franz Lehar's operetta, yet drastically shaped by Stroheim's re-writing of the original script, *The Merry Widow* is an intoxicating fusion of fairy tale, operatic music,² and a narrative and visual atmosphere constantly swinging, without missing a beat, from the macabre to the romantic. The film starts by introducing the elite of Monteblando society, notably the doddering King Nikita (George Fawcett) and the millionaire Baron Sadoja (Tully Marshall), a decrepit, Dracula-like figure. A cut to elsewhere in the kingdom shows the younger Crown Prince Mirko (Roy D'Arcy) and his cousin Prince Danilo, arriving separately to an army inspection. Mirko is hunched and stiff; fastidiously getting off his carriage, he observes the rural surroundings with an expression of disgust. By contrast, Danilo looks playful and relaxed, amusedly looking at dirty pictures as he is driven to meet his cousin. He is tall and handsome, and on arrival he charmingly shakes hands with the awaiting crowd. The lodge where the Princes are staying soon welcomes new arrivals, the Manhattan Follies, itinerant American artists whose star attraction is the pretty dancer Sally O'Hara.

From this moment, the film charts the attempts of its three main bachelors – Mirko, Danilo, and the Baron – to seduce the dancer. A sassy yet innocent girl abroad, Sally has no idea she is in the presence of royalty, and Danilo takes precautions to conceal the fact: he instructs the army officers to call him 'just plain Danilo Petrovich'. Although Sally's admirers share a lustful craving for her, Danilo is also intrigued by her personality; what begins as a game of erotic chasing turns into love, reciprocated by Sally. One night, after an intimate dinner together, they are interrupted by Mirko, who has spent the evening at an orgy. Mocking and spiteful, Mirko reveals Danilo's royal identity to Sally, but his cousin silences him by announcing his intention to marry her. More drama is to follow, however, as Danilo is told by the King and

Queen that his marriage to a commoner is out of the question; he brokenheartedly obeys, and is later seen crying desperately.

Meanwhile Sally, hysterical and self-destructive after Danilo's rejection, accepts the Baron's marriage proposal; the Baron however has a stroke before their wedding night, and his death makes Sally an immensely rich widow. After a year of mourning, the new Baroness Sadoja goes to Paris, and rumours of her glamorous lifestyle soon reach Monteblanco. Danilo, who continues to love her, is outraged to hear Mirko declare his intention to marry her; he follows his cousin to Paris, and tries in vain to drown his sorrow in partying and drinking. The two ex-lovers finally meet at a grand ball, where Danilo masterfully guides Sally through a sensuous waltz. Mirko challenges Danilo to a duel and shoots him in the chest, just as Sally arrives on the scene, overwhelmed by grief. The film then cuts to Monteblanco, where old king Nikita has died; during the funeral procession Mirko is shot dead by a servant he had abused in the past. The next scene has Sally attending to a prostrate figure in bed, none other than Danilo, who hasn't died of his duel wound; a messenger arrives, bearing the news of Mirko's assassination and Danilo's ascension to the throne. The final scene shows Danilo and Sally being crowned King and Queen.

This dazzling plot is supported by a breathtaking music score, and enriched by a spectacular visual style. Staging each frame with typically obsessive care, Stroheim creates a gallery of densely adorned interiors, of exteriors which are both grand and squalid, and of enormously detailed costumes. Whether in humble country inns, royal palaces, theatre backstage or exclusive clubs, rooms in *The Merry Widow* are brimming with props and motifs. Portraits of Monteblanco's King and Queen hang on the walls, together with other paintings of huge size, antlers, swords and guns, rich

tapestries, and ubiquitous crucifixes. The rooms' furniture, intricately carved in wood, is covered in bottles, decanters, and pieces of china, as well as discarded clothes and underwear. Candles and chandeliers of all shapes and sizes, in extravagant quantities, shed their light on every indoor space. Flags on poles abound inside and outside. To this array of inanimate objects, crowds and nameless individuals are added, often with striking effect; the people greeting the army inspection, for instance, stand immobile to attention in three different groups, neatly arranged according to gender and, for the men, type of uniform. The rooms where Danilo entertains Sally include two blindfolded, virtually naked chaperones, a boy and a girl who play string instruments on a bed. In the group of revelers partying with Mirko next door, and later entering Danilo's rooms, several men wear only elaborate loincloths, and huge hats decorated with bows and feathers. A sizeable crucifix is prominently displayed in one of these rooms. An even bigger crucifix, covering almost an entire wall, is hung next to Sally's hotel bed, where she collapses after the news of Danilo's desertion. The Baron's art-deco bedroom, instead, is copiously strewn with flowers on the wedding night. Two crucifixes of colossal size dominate the exterior setting for the coronation, towering like skyscrapers in awe-inspiring grandeur. On the other hand, the snow-covered street outside Danilo's apartment is filled with humble road-washers, road-sweepers, and a curved old lady pulling a cart. The rural location of the initial scenes is a grimy environment of mud and puddles, flies and flees, and freely-roaming dogs and pigs.

If settings in *The Merry Widow* create a solid world of multi-layered meaning, the characters' costumes mark the wearers as integral parts of this world. From military uniforms bedecked in complex ribbon designs, to Sally's increasingly glitzy, flesh-revealing wardrobe, the clothes and fashions of the protagonists seal their tie to the

film's stylistic order. As the primary female character, Sally parades glittery, quirkily sexy numbers, ranging from hot pants worn with half a tutu to dramatic evening gowns that plunge on her back. However, the men also wear imaginative clothes, all the more striking as they are almost always uniforms. Stroheim's well-known penchant for military attire is given full rein in *The Merry Widow*, as the narrative combines army and royalty with fairy-tale exoticism. Yet this original male garb also serves a leveling function, as the uniforms subsume individual characters to the same group. With the exception of a very few scenes, John Gilbert wears identical clothes to the ones worn by Mirko, the officers, and the dignitaries; they all sport the same haircut too, with the hair shaved from the nape to the middle of the head, and slightly ruffled on top (a style that today looks remarkably modern). It is a sign of Gilbert's magnetic presence in the film that in a crowd of bizarrely, yet identically-fashioned men, he easily stands out. In the ball scene, for example, the costume of MontebLANcan virility is a wide, pleated half-skirt worn with trousers and high, patent leather boots, an embroidered waistcoat over a loose shirt with matching gloves, a soft tie, a sash, a cord-like trimming hanging on the chest in complicated swirls, assorted medals and decorations, and a sword hanging from a strap. The wild fussiness of this uniform blends most of its wearers to burdened clothes dummies; Gilbert, instead, looks seductively handsome in it, and as he takes to the dance floor he exudes grace and heady glamour. (Fig.1)

The film's exhilarating visual style matches the operatic soundtrack. Characterized by recurring waltz and march tunes, and incorporating even a can-can, music in *The Merry Widow* supports the plot's giddy turns, while contributing to the homogenisation of its characters. Guided by the same tempo, the actors' performance

often includes highly stylised movements, creating the impression of a continuous dance where everyone's part is carefully choreographed.

The Merry Widow was a huge critical and commercial success, soon dubbed by *Film Daily* as 'the hit of New York' and 'the talk of the industry'.³ Despite its complex ensemble structure, however, few doubted that one actor had emerged as its prime attraction. While praising the film as 'a brilliant and gorgeous screen version of the romantic light opera',⁴ admiring its direction and mise-en-scene, and declaring Mae Murray's performance her best to date, the press mostly lavished attention on John Gilbert. 'With the release of *The Merry Widow*, John Gilbert may as well make up his mind not to fare forth into the public places without the aid of police protection. [...] Gilbert has been rapidly becoming an idol, now he will become an epidemic', warned *Photoplay*.⁵ According to *Picture-Play Magazine*, '...no-one else ever had the tremendous popularity John Gilbert is enjoying now. Since *The Merry Widow* came out, everything has changed'.⁶ Comparisons with Rudolph Valentino were not only frequent, but often suggested that Gilbert may now be the most worshipped of the two; the caption under a still of Gilbert and Murray dancing together claimed that *The Merry Widow*'s waltz 'threatens to become more popular than the tango in "The Four Horsemen"'.⁷ As Prince Danilo, it was observed, Gilbert had become 'A prince indeed – of that strange new kingdom lately arisen in democratic America and which we call Moviedom!'.⁸ No special mention was given of Mae Murray's beautiful gowns, yet it was noted that Gilbert dazzled '...in an amazing array of uniforms'.⁹ Writing retrospectively, Erich von Stroheim's biographer Arthur Lennig agrees that Gilbert, '...far more than Mae Murray – became vital to make the film a success. Indeed, *The Merry Widow* elevated him to stardom'.¹⁰

But just how did John Gilbert achieve this stardom? By which performative and cinematic means did he become *The Merry Widow*'s sensation? To explore possible answers to these questions, and to understand how Gilbert functions in the film, it is useful to consider some key issues in silent performance.

Far more than in sound films, acting in the silent era relied on gestural language. Gestures may convey information of a different kind, aiding plot development or character delineation, and contributing to the film's atmosphere. Compared to acting after the advent of sound, silent-film gestures can appear exaggerated, especially when turned into poses: these are deliberately emphasised stances, frequently modelled on recognisable rhetorical configurations (such as anger or despair), and involving a degree of suspension in the actor's movements.

However, silent performance is not reducible to a series of neatly separated gestures; indeed, according to David Mayer,¹¹ 'a gesture is not an isolated moment' but rather a performative process made up of stages, through which a certain bodily arrangement is reached. Meaning on screen is not achieved solely by this final arrangement, but by the way the performer links the intermediate stages of the gesture, or the transitions from one gesture to another; these negotiations, argues Mayer, are what create and sustain an actor's 'dramatic power', and constitute 'the unspoken subtext of the theatrical moment'.

David Mayer's analysis can be linked to another set of concerns about silent cinema, as discussed by Rebecca Swender.¹² Swender analyses silent film acting by prioritising the use and function of poses, and their bearing on the performance of male protagonists. Her claim is that while obvious poses are more likely to pertain to villainous roles, hero performances may still contain embedded or concealed poses.

Relating Swender's text to Mayer's, it may thus be argued that posing can be effected through negotiation, inserted in the flow of the actor's mediation of performative stages; as part of this process, embedded posing creates and maintains the actor's dramatic power.

A final issue emerging from Swender's essay is her use of 'divo' and 'divaesque'. Swender does not define these terms, simply adopting them to label the male actors she discusses; yet her strict association of these words to posing and stylised gesturing, in the context of silent film, points to the particular brands of flamboyance defining silent performances. For the purpose of this paper, 'divo' and 'divaesque' will denote a male screen presence commanding exceptional attention, not just by posing but through a variety of strategies; closely linked to 'star' but specific to silent performers, 'divaesque' will relate to an actor's overall dominance of the film text.

The conceptual frameworks outlined above can be usefully applied to John Gilbert in *The Merry Widow*. Like everyone else in the film, Gilbert is inserted in a performative structure of stylised gestural language and music-driven action; while the negotiation of gestures and music is undertaken, in different degrees, by the whole cast, Gilbert also negotiates his adherence to the film's collective style, which he simultaneously exploits to shape his uniqueness. As a divo and a hero, he embeds a divaesque quality not only in his performance, but in the fabric of the film itself. Within a stylistic regime balancing corruption and decrepitude with romance and vitality, Gilbert appropriates the last two elements: his overall presence is one of seductive energy, subtly yet steadily dominating the film.

There are several major ways in which Gilbert achieves all this. To begin with, his gestural language is defined by small yet perceptible poses, in a captivatingly nuanced performance that contrasts greatly with the overstated, one-dimensional acting of the others; at the same time, because of its embedded quality, Gilbert's posing is gracefully inserted in the film text, where it acquires further definition through other important elements. One is the fluidity of his movements. Unlike anyone else in the film, Danilo moves in a consistently smooth, flowing manner, projecting a sense of physical joy that, combined to his frequent smile and open posture, connotes an eagerness to please and be pleased. Sally, despite her prettiness and revealing outfits, is not engaged in outward seduction, and she often seems childishly sulky, comical, or clumsy; the rest of the cast are stiff, stolid or jerky. If the whole film is akin to a dance, then it is Danilo, rather than the Widow, who performs its merry and vital steps, leaving Sally to criss-cross them with agitation or strained aplomb, and Mirko to counter them with his sinister, crab-like advance. Crucially, Mirko's creepiness, the Baron's repulsiveness, and Sally's girlishness are all equally desexualised, while Danilo's energy is unmistakably passionate, with a contained yet clear sexy edge. These aspects of Gilbert's presence are visible even in very brief scenes, building a performative pattern which is given full expansion in longer sequences.

An early example is a scene at the country inn, when Danilo has just met Sally. She needs his help, as all the rooms are occupied by army officers, including Danilo and Mirko, thus leaving the Manhattan Follies without sleeping quarters. On hearing this, Danilo goes to the inn's diner, where Mirko and the officers are gathered, and tells them they should free up space to allow the American girls their own rooms. In these few minutes on screen, Gilbert's unique gestural lexicon is embedded in his negotiation of performative stages, as well as in negotiating the film's visual style and

collective narrative emphasis. The scene begins with Danilo framed under the arch of a doorframe, stopping for just an instant on his way to the dining room. This is sufficient time for Gilbert to strike a light pose: keeping an upright position, he places his right leg on the step in front of him, simultaneously arching his left arm and letting his left hand rest on his other leg. He is smiling broadly. (Fig.2) His stance takes the meaning of a self-presentation, a sign that his person is worth admiring because of its aesthetic appeal, energy and dash. A point-of-view shot then cuts to the crowded room he is about to enter; the camera then returns to Gilbert who now walks on, still smiling and swinging his arms, suggesting a cheerful dynamism. He enters the room and joins a company of men in uniform, all dressed and styled exactly as himself. Yet Danilo's presence is different from everyone else's, attracting the viewer and giving the impression that he, and he alone, wears in a significant way the tight-fitting white jacket with high collar, puffed-up trousers and high boots. Gilbert achieves this partly by taking advantage of his position, at the centre of the frame (Fig.3): from there he commands attention through his erect posture and animated gestures, looking remarkably different from the slouching men around him. These notably include the curved, slow-moving Mirko, who is openly contrasted to Gilbert through several shot-reverse-shots. (Fig.4)

Gilbert's performance as he addresses the group contains a suggestion of embedded poses, because of the fleeting suspension he inserts in his movements: keeping very straight, while pulling his shoulders slightly backwards, he turns his head to face each man in turn, pausing briefly every time. In so doing he exhibits two of his performative strategies, which he will employ to striking effect in longer scenes. One is the upright, faintly confrontational stance involving back and shoulders, which he uses throughout the film especially if facing Mirko or Sally; the other is the repeated

slight pause, marking a fractional separation between each of a series of similar gestures. These bodily shifts are carried out seamlessly, in fluid succession, and concluded by a brief movement which is one of Danilo's trademark moves: he tosses his head back and laughs. Then, just as he has finished his speech, he seems to remember something, and his next words appear on screen: '- while we are here I wish not to be called 'Highness' – just plain Danilo Petrovich – '. His statement is greeted with mocking hilarity by Mirko, who proposes a toast to Danilo as to 'the world's champion of indoor sports'; at this allusion to his sexual appetite, Danilo again throws his head back and laughs, but with stronger emphasis this time, while maintaining eye contact with Mirko. This movement suggests extra confidence triggered by the remark, and highlights Gilbert's features by foregrounding his neck: as if it was a necklace, the high white collar sets off his dark eyes, hair and moustache, an effect conspicuously unique among all the uniform wearers. Gently yet unmistakably eroticised, Gilbert's presence embeds a divaesque quality, attracting the viewer and dominating the frame, while respecting the scene's collective arrangement.

Indeed, Gilbert's capacity for stillness is another key element in his performative negotiations, and a defining characteristic of his relation to the film's style. Even in the brief group scene just described, which lacks the frenzy of some later sequences, Danilo combines energetic activity with the capacity to pause and wait. Patiently listening to Mirko's words, never attempting to stop or upstage him, he allows him to perform and over-perform his evil part; in these moments Gilbert is still and mute, yet intensely present through his divaesque aura and noticeable quietness. Awaiting his turn yet becoming a natural pole of attention, he also uses the pause as a link between his gestures. In the more dramatic scenes that follow, Gilbert's self-containment will

feel like a beacon of order, necessarily balancing the apparent chaos of the others. In this early exchange in the dining room, the smooth insertion of stillness in his performance only makes Gilbert stand out more. Far from presenting a 'plain Danilo Petrovich', the whole scene embeds and suggests the exact opposite, the discreet ascendancy of Danilo the Divo.

Casting, of course, is a key factor in Gilbert's star-like presence in the film: the only handsome man on screen, he is also constantly pitted against Mirko, whose deliberately grotesque appearance is emphasised to the point of repulsiveness. Yet Gilbert's good looks need Gilbert's performance to produce star quality, and this performance is inseparable from compliance to, and exploitation of, his allotted place in *The Merry Widow*. Conceived as a foil to Montebianco's most prominent males – the aged King Nikita, but chiefly Mirko and the Baron as two variations of hideous, sepulchral virility – Danilo provides Gilbert with both a platform and a challenge. The intense macabre quality of his rivals, the screen time given to D'Arcy's sensationally repellent villain, and the latter's link to scenarios of orgiastic, sadistic decadence, constitute formidable competition for a romantic prince. A merely handsome Danilo may not be a match for the others' attention-grabbing perversion, but Gilbert is able to offer 'the looks, the charm, and the wild energy'¹³ which together construct an irresistible front of vitality. Gilbert's seductive combination is skilfully channelled through *The Merry Widow*, and it is tempting to remember that Stroheim had wanted a different actor, Norman Kerry, to play Danilo.¹⁴ Inserted in a filmic system not especially committed to his individual presence, Gilbert crystallises the vibrant strand that is in fact the film's essential element. As the two sides of Montebianco's aristocratic coin, Danilo and Mirko embody the kingdom's dualistic world, layered in

lively and moribund strata by turn; Mirko's lifeless dimension, however, is subordinated to the exuberant rhythm defining the film, and is eventually doomed. While D'Arcy's bravura performance turns him into a hugely enjoyable villain, this enjoyment hinges on his eerily cool, almost vampiresque malice. Evil is a passive sport for Mirko, carried out with chilling composure and rooted in his bored cruelty; it has no exciting or vital connotations.

By contrast, Danilo's presence is sparkling with life, expressed by even the smallest movement or fleeting facial expression. Through a performance defined by brief embedded poses, Gilbert inserts the suggestion of boundless enthusiasm. In a scene at the beginning of the film, for example, Danilo lies smoking on his hotel bed, while servants come in and out of the room, bringing provisions. Suddenly, a pretty maid enters carrying some linen, clearly blushing for the pleasure of Danilo's presence. Immediately sitting up from his reclining position, Danilo exchanges a few words with the girl; then he literally jumps off the bed, landing on both feet and lightly crossing them, while bending a knee as if in a bow. His expression is animated. At the same time, he crosses his chest with a hand, playfully suggesting a formal greeting. These rapid movements are emphasised by a small deliberate bounce, as he straightens his jacket while imperceptibly swaying, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, in contained excitement. (Fig.5) His smiling face is eagerly pointed towards the maid. All this has taken only a few seconds, and is the prelude to his grabbing the girl in a passionate kiss; yet Gilbert's mobile countenance, and the grace and dynamism of his moves, have infused a sense of happy energy in an otherwise cliché scene of seduction.

Gilbert's projection of vitality emerges through his negotiation of external elements, which range from other actors to the film's settings and objects. This is evident in a scene taking place during Sally's theatre performance, when Danilo and Mirko separately enter her dressing room, taking advantage of her temporary absence. Unaware of each other's intentions, they both mean to wait for Sally's arrival and take her to dinner; Danilo has brought a massive flower bouquet, a romantic note to go with it, and a bottle of champagne, while Mirko has simply gone there with no preparations. The room is small, cramped, and overflowing with clothes and trinkets; just as Danilo has finished arranging his gifts for Sally, his cousin arrives on the scene. Danilo quickly hides behind a large screen in the middle of the room, and from this position, visible to the audience but unseen by Mirko, he watches the latter's moves. What follows is a skilfully synchronised game of hide and seek, in which Gilbert and D'Arcy manage to avoid each other within their restricted spatial range. As Arthur Lennig observes, here 'Stroheim stages a most humorous ballet' between the princes;¹⁵ a crucial aspect of this dance-like scene, however, is the strikingly different fashion in which the two execute their steps, and how they relate to external factors.

The room provides little scope for virtuoso physical acting. It is divided in two by the half-opened screen, which almost reaches the ceiling; to the left is Sally's dressing table, covered in clothes and toiletries, and surrounded by more dresses hanging from a peg hooked on a window. A chair and a small stool lie next to the dresser. Behind the screen and slightly to the right, a large wardrobe is partly visible near the unmade bed, whose sheets and blankets fall in disorderly fashion to the floor. To the right of the bed a chair, a stool, and a big stove with a pipe as high as the room, further impede the ease of movement. The screen dividing the room also separates the two

cousins: having deftly skirted around it while Mirko observed the flowers, Danilo then remains partly hidden by the screen, on the left of the frame, with Mirko on the right. They are both shot in medium close-up in a static view, as they have almost no room to change their location. It is remarkable how Danilo, virtually trapped in his hiding place between the screen and the chair, is however able to move constantly: while keeping an intent gaze on Mirko, he alternately spins on himself, jumps up several times to get a better view, steps on the chair, gets down again, and changes posture several times behind the screen, all the while moving his head slightly, and holding his coat and sword in his hands. (Fig.6) His movements flow easily and gracefully from one absurd position to the next.

Meantime, Mirko calmly surveys the flowers, reads the accompanying note, and tears it up. As Danilo watches his cousin's actions, his mood swings from amused to concerned: this is signalled not only by his rapidly shifting facial expressions, with his eyes changing from sparkly to anxious, but also by the restless yet fluid motion of his head and upper body. Although Gilbert is partly concealed by the screen, he stages a full performance that involves face and body, helping to maintain his dramatic power in the scene; while D'Arcy's presence is better displayed, it feels dull and static by comparison. It is notable how Gilbert carries out his acting in strict contact with the prop nearest to him, the screen dividing the room. Rather than being hindered by this obtrusive piece of furniture, he makes his relation to it an integral part of his performance: peeping over its edge, he comfortably presses his cheek against it and leaves it there briefly, then directs his frequent physical shifts towards it, either slightly leaning on it or adapting his face and body to its presence, as if testing different connections to it. (Fig.7) These movements are often executed through little

bouncy steps, suggesting not only caution in such an awkward situation, but also a fundamental sense of fun. Most remarkably, Gilbert performs all this without leaving the tiny portion of floor he is forced to occupy.

The contrast with D'Arcy could not be greater, as Mirko's superior freedom of movement results in his stilted, vulture-like turning around the room, with a curved spine and neck; holding a cigarette through clenched teeth, he does not actually smile but grins sinisterly. Danilo instead, as he finally kicks his cousin out of the room, smiles ecstatically to himself while leaning back against the door, one knee softly crossed over the other, expressing relaxed satisfaction. Throughout the whole sequence, Gilbert's divaesque quality has shone in his embedded movements and expressions, and his seductive aura of pleasure and fun.

While John Gilbert is constantly pitted against Roy D'Arcy, in a performative interplay that is central to the film's narrative, there are other major interactions he must negotiate in *The Merry Widow*. If Mirko provides a formidable opponent, Sally furnishes an opportunity for romance that, conventionally, should simply highlight Danilo's dreamy quality; yet Mae Murray presents a double challenge to Gilbert's heart-throb status in the film.

First, she is presented as an object of desire in her own right, and thus as Danilo's potential rival for the viewer's attention: she has not only glamorous clothes, and wildly beautiful hair crowning her heart-shaped face, but also an aura of angelic radiance produced by especially skilful lighting. (Fig.8) Secondly, the love story motivated by Sally, giving impetus to Danilo's role, is a narrative always jostling with the film's darker vision, with the director's authorial stamp of bleak corruption and base carnal instincts. While Mirko and the Baron are clearly presented as exponents of

lasciviousness, Danilo is not initially safe from the taint of lewd masculinity; his association with soft-porn images in his very first scene, followed by his forceful attempt to seduce a maid, mark him as one of Monteblando's lads, an early sign that the film's world is precariously balanced between crudeness and elegance. As the catalyst of Danilo's sex drive, which is first introduced as voracious, basic, and opportunistic, Sally aids Stroheim's crafting of a gloriously sordid universe, whose redemption by purity is constantly at risk. Danilo's falling in love prevents this sordidness from taking over, but the film's hero remains in negotiation with the plot's situational and atmospheric vulgarity.

John Gilbert was well aware of his character's baser instincts: discussing Danilo in the first person, he remarked 'I see a girl who suits me, and I reach out to take her. I am no country boy with his first sweetheart, neither am I very respectful to women, so I act accordingly. But when I fall in love with this one girl, my attitude changes, and my love-making becomes more real'.¹⁶ Without elaborating on his acting, Gilbert here stresses the development of his role and performance; in practice, this development is expressed as a behavioural conversion, with Gilbert performing the transition from one individual mode (the charming cad) to another, different yet not unrelated (the charming honest lover). The connection between Danilo's two versions constitutes his allegiance to the film's worldview, which is a delicately balanced coexistence of corruption and innocence; while never upsetting this equilibrium, Danilo steadily appropriates the romantic, honourable strand of the narrative. By the time he is shown sadly revelling in Paris, drunk amid a chorus line of semi-naked girls, his association with true love and brokenheartedness is too strongly established to be compromised.

In order to be free to achieve this ethical dominance, which is also textual dominance in *The Merry Widow*, Gilbert must first navigate the seedy aspects of his diegetic world. At the level of the film's plot, seediness is expressed through episodic crudity, while being visually translated into an emphasis on the ultra-prosaic, the grimy, and the disgusting. For example, when Danilo wants to startle Mirko in Sally's dressing room, he applies to his face a sheet of sticky fly paper, abundant with preys. Danilo's very first step in the film, taken while getting off his carriage, ends in his placing a foot in a puddle, which is fed by mud where pigs roam about. While Gilbert's divaesque presence carries him effortlessly through these moments, his interaction with Sally provides more testing situations. A prime example is a crucial sequence in the middle of the film, the intimate dinner in Danilo's apartment, which is later interrupted by Mirko. While notions of 'romantic' are encoded in the scene through various conventions – the tête-à-tête setting, the enchanted look of the candle-lit rooms, Sally's dreamily thrilled response – Danilo is placed in a position that is potentially the death of romance.

Set in attractive surroundings, filled however with such obtrusive furniture that Gilbert, to get up from the dinner table, is forced to carefully lift a leg to negotiate a protruding edge, this sequence calls for Danilo's attempt to seduce Sally by dishonest means. He has to deliberately spill the first course, soup, on her dress, to force her to take it off; before this exploit, he must engage in prolonged interaction with props, while afterwards he must deal with Sally's undignified, soup-sodden state. At the same time, Danilo here has to show the beginning of his genuine feelings for Sally, and his own vulnerability behind such confident manipulations. Intercut with shots of Mirko's disturbing orgy, which is taking place nearby, the scene must prepare the

grounds for Danilo's full conversion to love and romance. In other words, Gilbert must negotiate the cumulative weight of the scene's conflicting aspects: Danilo's crude designs, that are powerfully supported by the film's vein of corruption; banal inanimate objects; sticky hot soup (actually hot: Stroheim ordered the real article for the scene, presumably to draw the maximum indignation from Murray's performance); ¹⁷ Sally's prominent and potentially titillating role; and his own transition to a nobler version of his character. To all this must be added the scene's rhythm, shaped by a playful musical soundtrack, apt to turn everything into a farce and carry the hero with it. Instead, Gilbert perfectly calibrates his mediation of all these elements, through a skilled combination of expressivity, physical grace, and meaningfully embedded gestures.

The scene begins with Sally sitting at the table, which glitters with crystal and silver, while Danilo is standing on the other side, preparing cocktails. Thus separated by the table, they converse. Sally's gestures while she talks are measured, almost slow, as she is visibly stunned by the lavishness of her host's apartment; by contrast, Gilbert is frantically shaking the cocktail bottle with enormous energy, something which in itself may have connoted mad frenzy. However, Gilbert controls this movement by keeping the rest of his body as still as possible, with just a slight sway of his shoulders, and by maintaining his gaze fixed on Sally, while smiling all the time. Letting his arms and hands take furious care of the alcohol, and steadily focusing his attention on his guest, he gives an impression of supreme confidence, matched by contained yet impressive vigour. (Fig.9) The dialogue between the two is revealed by the intertitles, and centres on Sally's experience of dining with male admirers. She says she frequently had to run away hungry, because 'her host got fresh'. Danilo's

reaction to this veiled warning is to toss his head back and laugh: this now familiar divaesque gesture reinforces his seductive aura, guiding the audience to focus on him more than on Sally, and to take a benign view of the next shot. A cut away from the table reveals an adjacent bedroom, in which a boy and a girl, blindfolded and almost naked, play languorous music; these bizarre chaperones are a confirmation of Danilo's seduction plans.

At this point, however, something unexpected and poignantly new happens. Seated opposite Sally, and still smiling, Danilo asks: 'Did you always run away – when your host – got fresh?', to which she solemnly replies 'Always!'. Danilo's response is remarkable: he stares at her with eyes turned suddenly anxious, quickly nods several times in acceptance, and slightly recoils his face into his chin. (Fig.10) His smile is gone, and he pushes himself back against the chair. It is a brief moment, but it has revealed depth of feelings and genuine apprehension. In a second Gilbert is smiling again, though not so brazenly now, and has thus negotiated the narrative transition between two phases of his character's progression. He has also provided a precedent of considerate seriousness, which will temper the audience's impression of his next actions, and achieve full validation later in the film. Finally, Gilbert has made his eyes protagonists of this performative moment, drawing attention to them and adding solidity to their role in his acting patterns. Previously shown to be intense and darting, his gaze is now also responsive, affected by his feelings and those of others; this ardent yet sensitive way of looking, unique among the film's characters, becomes another distinctive trait of Danilo's. While Sally's eyes are also expressive, often showing enchantment or distress, they are inseparable from Murray's overall likeness to a pretty doll; constantly bathed in soft light when shot in close-up, and often

accompanied by tantrums or bewilderment, her gaze has the unaware, sexless appeal of a cute puppy or spoilt child.

The dinner scene at Danilo's apartment continues, progressing from cocktails to first course. After a brief flirtatious stint, in which he sits next to Sally and vainly tries to overcome her resistance, Danilo gets up again, moving around the table to spoon out the soup. In carrying out this trivial activity, Gilbert gives a masterfully divaesque performance: combining trademark acting strategies with the negotiation of gestures, he acquires total control of the narrative moment, carrying this authority into the next part of the sequence.

Shot in medium close-up, Gilbert stands behind the table, holding a soup plate in his left hand and a ladle in his right one. Scarcely visible in front of him is a large bowl from which he fills the ladle. While emptying the ladle in the plate, refilling it, and pouring the soup again with rapid and confident movements, Gilbert regularly shifts his gaze from the soup to Sally. Lifting his eyes to look at her, he inserts a very slight pause in the activity of his hands. This cycle – hand gestures, gaze on Sally, pause, hand gestures again – is repeated several times. The pause between identical movements is one of Gilbert's typical patterns in the film, adding gravitas to his presence (despite his apparently unimportant activity) and poignancy to the activity itself (as indeed the soup is about to play a crucial role in the plot). At the same time, Gilbert uses his gaze to negotiate the transitions between one gesture and the next, enriching each transition with the intense meanings expressed through his eyes. (Fig.11) Delivering a piercing look, perfectly steady and, for every brief moment, utterly fixed on Sally, Gilbert's eyes convey a sense of alert control, imminent excitement, and interest in her response. Seamlessly embedded in an ordinary action,

this is a prime divaesque moment, lending Gilbert dominance of the scene and making his prosaic gestures thrilling.

Importantly, his seductive performance in relation to the soup affects what happens next: as he walks smilingly towards Sally and spills the plate's entire contents on her lap, this wickedly deliberate act is invested with redeeming sophistication. Danilo's crude designs appear suddenly un-crude, not least because his smooth movements are contrasted to Sally's, now clumsy to the point of ungainliness. Leaping up from her seat, she stands awkwardly on legs open astride, holding up her sodden dress with both hands, and in this position she bounces uncomfortably from one foot to the other. Murray's body here looks comical, undignified and, because of the way she holds her skirt, very rotund. Her face is flustered, and her usual loveliness mortified: she is faintly ridiculous. Yet rather than bring Gilbert down to a farcical level, Murray's presence highlights by contrast her co-star's elegance, while killing the titillating potential of her own part (a beautiful woman about to remove her half-soaked dress). As Gilbert proceeds to unfasten Murray's dress with rapid and delicate moves, urging her 'not to let it spoil their evening', the lively and graceful thread of his performance remains unbroken. The whole sequence has been rhythmically performed, with both actors maintaining a close tempo and a balletic reaction to each other's movements; yet once again, the episode shows off Gilbert's mercurial seductiveness against his partner's unattractive steps.

John Gilbert's rise to dominance in *The Merry Widow* is advanced by the next scene, with the help of two elements: editing, and his performance in relation to Sally's

emotions. These factors establish an ideal situation from which to negotiate his ultimate power over the film text.

The appearance of Sally and Danilo in his apartment is both preceded and intercut with images of Mirko's night out; indeed, the film uses intertitles to stress how the two princes are in the same building, only a few meters apart. While Danilo and his guest are quietly and intimately absorbed in each other, accompanied by a discreet music track, Mirko is indulging in sinister excess to the sound of a wild can-can. Although the orgy scene shot by Stroheim was mercilessly cut and censored, what remains conveys a strong feel of sadistic laxity: surrounded by a bevy of men and women intent on random touching, kissing, and gleefully pouncing on each other's bodies, Mirko delights in shooting cigarettes held in his guests' mouths. (Fig.12) This use of firearms, causing frightened screams from the party and visible terror in the unfortunate smokers, provides diabolical precision in an otherwise chaotic spectacle, where pillow feathers cloud the air and Mirko is increasingly excited; groped and caressed by groups of women, he aims his gun at the statue of a nude female figure, and shoots her in the face. When later a servant falls on the floor, he viciously steps on him and walks over his body, quickly imitated by the others. In comparison, Danilo's soup trick appears tame and almost decent, and entirely forgivable after his following scene with Sally. As the latter waits in the bedroom near the dining room, wearing a dressing gown while her dress is being cleaned, Danilo joins her.

For the first time in the film he is not in uniform, wearing instead a plain, soft shirt with Russian-style side buttoning; the absence of stiff tailoring and military paraphernalia makes him look less confident. Nonetheless, he soon grabs Sally and frantically tries to kiss her, but she resists and bursts into tears, saying 'I thought – hoped – that you were different'. Danilo stops, looking confused and distressed, and

asks: 'is it because you don't care enough? - please Sally answer me'. Sobbing into the bed's pillow, she replies 'it is because I care too much'. On hearing this, Danilo's face shows a range of emotions – incredulity, the dawning of a new idea, and finally awe – while he slowly retreats away from Sally, ending up kneeling on the floor. These are Gilbert's slowest movements in the whole film. As his body detaches itself from Murray's, his hands hovering over her shoulder yet not daring to touch her, he is moving almost in slow motion. He first holds an arm outstretched and immobile, then pulls it back, and shifts his body further away. A close-up reveals his wide-open eyes and intense expression, with no trace of a smile. (Fig.13) Gradually slipping off the bed and on the floor, he gently takes her hand and respectfully kisses it. The marked slowness of Gilbert's performance has given this brief scene the feel of a pause, of a clear break; his negotiation of the soup episode, and transition to immaculate hero, are now complete. After a cut to Mirko's party in full swing, the camera returns to Danilo and Sally, framing their faces together, and then Danilo's words come up on screen: 'I love you – Sally'. As the film cuts back to Mirko, who is now spying on the couple from behind a curtain, a point-of-view shot shows them kissing. Danilo has chosen Sally, and though he will succumb to outside pressure and will need to earn her again, he has now achieved ethical dominance, a position of narrative strength. Sally, who is innocent and good, is also aligned with the film's ethical side, but she could never dominate it, as her presence has not gained the importance and sheer divaesque allure of Gilbert's Danilo.

Mirko and his party now irrupt in the bedroom, mocking the lovers, and Mirko wastes no time in revealing to Sally that Danilo is of royal blood. The dramatic scene that follows is a key one for Gilbert to negotiate: it sees Mirko's friends carousing in a

frenzy of malice, Mirko himself taunting the lovers with delighted cruelty, and Sally almost fainting from shock and distress. Narratively and visually, it is one of the film's busiest moments, as well as a potentially damaging turn for Danilo's character. The way Gilbert deals with this situation is first of all through physical stillness, which makes him immediately stand out. Already conspicuous among the wild crowd by the simplicity of his clothes, and by his silent and watchful demeanour, Gilbert is also virtually motionless: he stands very upright, with his habitual stiffening of back and shoulder made more visible by his thin shirt. He only moves his head slightly, shifting his eyes from Sally to Mirko, appearing worried when looking at the former, enraged when turning to the latter. He then fixes a steely gaze on Mirko. (Fig.14) Static yet highly expressive, Danilo resembles a beacon of meaningful order: he stands between the cruel debauchery of Mirko's party and the helpless collapse of Sally, who is now completely off screen. He finally speaks: 'be careful, sirs!', and after a slight pause: '- you dare to insult the future Princess Petrovich!'. The gravity of this announcement has hardly sunk into the company, when Danilo turns to Mirko and adds, with an unflinching look of contempt: 'I always knew you were a swine!'. Gilbert has turned the tide of the narrative, while hardly moving throughout. His performance, a careful negotiation of his chaotic settings, has not compromised the balance of elements in the frame, or the visual and narrative space given to Mirko and his party; indeed, Gilbert has used these elements to perform in contrast to them rather than against them, and in the process he has narratively and ethically won the scene.

In *The Merry Widow*, John Gilbert negotiates his star-making performance with a range of filmic elements, all of which are, to some extent, subordinated to Erich von Stroheim. Although himself curbed by nervous studio producers, Stroheim cast his

peculiar vision everywhere in the film, and most notably in its centrepiece, the waltz scene in Paris. MGM may have thought that by robbing Stroheim of the final editing, and having Irving Thalberg complete the task instead, this romantic episode would satisfy conventions;¹⁸ but Thalberg still worked with what Stroheim had shot, which was not conventional material. Faced with the film's only attractive protagonists, reunited at last in a romantic dance, Stroheim devotes copious amount of footage to the orchestra playing the waltz, to close-ups of musical instruments, and to extreme long shots of the ball which make Danilo and Sally virtually invisible. Nonetheless, he also uses slow motion and selective framing to highlight the couple. The result is visually complex, as individual presences are singled out only to be subsumed into a wider context; in terms of Gilbert's presence in the film, it is a fitting summary of his performative negotiations.

Both aided and hindered by the dynamics of the scene, Gilbert emerges as its primary attraction, totally eclipsing Murray's professional dancing skills and glamorous looks. From the moment the pair hit the floor, despite frequent interruptions when the camera turns elsewhere, Gilbert exploits three factors in his allotted part. First, as the man in the waltzing duo, Gilbert of course leads; however, leading could have showcased Murray as his conquest, drawing attention to the object of desire he is about to win. Instead, Gilbert's dancing highlights only him. Already much taller than Murray, he is slightly hunched over her in a preying posture; graceful yet very decisive, he twirls with her in his arms till she's hardly noticeable, literally and metaphorically flattened out by his dominating body. Meanwhile the dance has suffered no disturbance, as Gilbert has not interfered with their overall movement, and indeed they beautifully spin on the floor. Murray glitters with jewels, her back and shoulders are exposed, and she has feathers in her hair: yet inexorably, the viewer is

guided towards Gilbert's swirling costume and long legs, and to his eager back and neck. Gilbert's posturing takes advantage of another factor, the music: Franz Lehar's 'Siren Valse'. Having appropriated the dance, he moves at one with the waltz melody, giving the impression that his presence is the core of the scene; supported by the music's power, he also shares it, without disrupting the film's flow. Finally, Gilbert takes possession of the very dance steps he is meant to perform. Without ever falling out of pace with the music, he gradually slides into moves which are far more reminiscent of a tango than of a waltz. Holding Murray at the waist with his right arm, his body pressed onto hers, he glides on, bending a knee forward at each step, while lowering himself over her. (Fig.15) These are not only eroticised, deliberately sensational movements; they are also poses, as Gilbert's advancement on the dance floor is marked by a fractional halt at every completed step, his right leg bent at the knee, his whole person curved over Murray. Thus embedding a rhetoric figure of passion into the scene, Gilbert also stresses his control over Murray's body, yet sexualises only his own in the process. This tango-waltz is his ultimate act of self-display in *The Merry Widow*, performed without usurping the film's style, and achieved in spite of the scene's distracting vagaries.

In her assessment of John Gilbert, Jeanine Basinger writes: 'he seemed, somehow, to believe in all of it. He never showed the slightest sense of discomfort in his stiff military uniforms, nor was there ever a trace of irony or self-mockery'.¹⁹ In *The Merry Widow*, Gilbert suggests a belief in the uniformity of the film's world, as he functions in synergy with its system. Yet he simultaneously rises to dominance without ever denying that system: on the contrary, his performance acknowledges and

validates the style, the rhythm, and the narrative drive of the film, from which he negotiates his emergence as a divo and as a star.

Author Information

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¹ Andrew Klevan, preface to *Film Performance: from Achievement to Appreciation* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), (no page nos.).

² Although the original score for Erich von Stroheim's *The Merry Widow* is lost, the musician and historian of silent film music Dennis James has offered a reconstruction of it (which has been performed live at screenings of the film around the world, and which accompanies the 2010 Warner dvd release of the film). This score is based on James's extensive research on original cue sheets, on his vast knowledge of their use, and of their likely combination with Lehar's music. Given James's specific expertise on the topic, and intense study of *The Merry Widow*, all references to the score assume its close approximation to the original.

³ *Film Daily*, vol.31, 34, Jan-Dec 1925.

⁴ *Photoplay*, vol. 28, 29: Jul-Dec 1925, 16.

⁵ *Photoplay*, 28:5, Jul-Dec 1925, 28:5, 27.

⁶ *Picture-Play Magazine* Sep 1925-Feb 1926, 28.

⁷ *Photoplay*, vol.28, 29: Jul-Dec 1925.

⁸ *Picture –Play Magazine*, vol.22, Mar-Aug 1925, 21.

⁹ *Picture-Play Magazine*, vol.23, Sep 1925-Feb 1926, 58.

¹⁰ Arthur Lennig, *Stroheim* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 223.

¹¹ David Mayer, "Acting in Silent Film: Which Legacy of the Theatre?" in *Screen Acting*, ed. Alan Lovell Alan and Peter Krämer (London: Routledge, 1999), 10-30.

¹² Rebecca Swender, "The Problem of the Divo: New Models for Analyzing Silent-Film Performance", *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 58, no.1/2 (2006), 7-20.

¹³ Lennig, *Stroheim*, 223.

¹⁴ Richard Koszarski, *Von: the Life & Films of Erich von Stroheim* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2001), 189.

¹⁵ Lennig, *Stroheim*, 229.

¹⁶ *Picture-Play Magazine*, Mar-Aug 1926, p.34.

¹⁷ Eve Golden, *John Gilbert: the Last of the Silent Film Stars* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 95.

¹⁸ Lennig, *Stroheim*, 236.

¹⁹ Jeanine Basinger, *Silent Stars* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 389.

ELISABETTA GIRELLI

**‘JUST PLAIN DANILO PETROVICH’: JOHN GILBERT’S PERFORMANCE
AS NEGOTIATION IN *THE MERRY WIDOW*.**



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig.4



Fig.5



Fig.6



Fig.7



Fig.8



Fig.9



Fig.10



Fig.11



Fig.12



Fig.13



Fig.14



Fig.15